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At War Against Dam, Tribe Turns to Old Ways

By DEAN E. MURPHY

SHASTA LAKE, Calif., Sept. 13 - The enemy stands 602 feet tall and weighs 15 million tons. But Mark Franco said he was unafraid. His face painted with black stripes and his head crowned with eagle feathers, the 49-year-old Mr. Franco was at war for the first time in his life.

"We were led here through prayer," he said, his chest bare except for ceremonial necklaces and an abalone shell positioned over his heart. "This is what we need to do."

The dull thud of a wooden drum half-buried in the soft earth signaled the call to dance, as Mr. Franco and seven other members of the Winnemem Wintu Indian tribe circled a small pit fire. Sunday night was the opening of a four-day ceremony that had not been performed by the Winnemem since 1887.

Known as the Hu'p Chonas, the ritual of dancing and fasting on acorn water signals that the Winnemem are at war, though this is not a battle fought with traditional weaponry against a traditional adversary. The Winnemem are summoning their spiritual masters against a force that they know as "the concrete barrier," the 59-year-old Shasta Dam, one of California's biggest.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation, in its pressing mission to quench California's seemingly insatiable thirst, would like to raise the dam by as much as 18½ feet. The enlargement of Shasta Lake, the state's largest reservoir, which sustains the farms and people of the Central Valley, is part of a statewide plan to increase storage capacity in at least five locations and to manage some salmon populations better.

But the Winnemem, a band of only about 125 members, say enough is enough. After the dam was built in the 1930's and 40's, the water behind it swallowed their villages and ancestral homelands along the McCloud River, which is one of several tributaries that feed the reservoir and, the Winnemem say, has sustained them and many other Wintu Indians for a thousand years.

"We are here to face the dam, to face the enemy," said Mr. Franco's wife, Caleen Sisk-Franco, the tribe's spiritual leader and chief, who sang a soulful prayer for her warriors over burning manzanita branches on a grassy slope near the dam. "This is not against the people."

During the dam's construction, the Winnemem exhumed the corpses of 183 members from a doomed graveyard and watched as their homes were knocked down. Now, if the dam grows even taller, tribal leaders say, about 20 sacred sites, including a burial ground of 17 additional Winnemem and a rock where Winnemem girls pray as part of a puberty ritual, will be lost to the reservoir.

"This is too much to ask of a people," Ms. Sisk-Franco said.

One of the dancers, Gary Hayward Slaughter Mulcahy, who owns a coffee shop near Sacramento, said losing just one sacred site broke a circle of connection among all of them, making it hard for the Winnemem to practice their religion.

Like many of the 100 or so people who gathered here, some of them Indians from neighboring tribes, the 50-year-old Mr. Mulcahy complained about generations of mistreatment at the hands of white settlers, with the Shasta Dam only the freshest of many wounds. As he prepared for the ceremony, tuning the oak drum by twisting a series of metal screws, he wore a T-shirt depicting armed Indians and bearing the inscription "Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism Since 1492."

"If they go under the water," he said of the tribe's sacred sites, "it will be like somebody just came in and bulldozed the church down."

The federal government, which built the dam and reservoir as part of the Central Valley Project, has considered enlarging Shasta Lake since 1980. The Bureau of Reclamation only recently set aside a proposal that would have added 200 feet to the top of the dam. Under the proposal now being developed with the state, construction of a 6½- or 18½-foot addition would begin sometime after 2010, with important environmental reviews starting next spring.

"We are still conducting feasibility studies on doing this," said Jeffrey S. McCracken, a spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation. "Some groups are very concerned about what impacts it will have on cultural resources."

In addition to the Winnemem, some property owners in the area, including the Hearst family, have been among those upset about the proposal, Mr. McCracken said. A number of fishing and environmental groups, like California Trout, have also challenged the proposed project.

But a report released last month by the Bureau of Reclamation found that raising the Shasta Dam "is highly cost-efficient compared to developing other new water sources." The report also listed among its findings that the taller dam would not "result in major impacts to existing flow conditions or other resources of the McCloud River."

Members of the Winnemem have been attending hearings about the proposed expansion in recent months, but they are at a disadvantage because the tribe is not formally recognized under federal law.

In calling her warriors to dance, Ms. Sisk-Franco said she was seeking intervention from the spirit world on federal recognition as well. Like the dam, recognition is an intensely political issue. "It gives you some standing and gives you some rights," she said.

Ms. Sisk-Franco, dressed in her ceremonial whites, sat Monday on a folding chair a few yards from the dancers as several women sang songs that "came down" to her from the spirit world.

"Just now, a song came down, and it was like the osprey came flying by and it brought that song in," she said after reciting the words into a tape recorder. "They are flying up there with the Creator; they are the ones that take the message up."

The Winnemem consider themselves a patient people. The last time the war dance was performed, 117 years ago, they were rallying against the construction of a fish hatchery on the McCloud.

Nothing happened for many years after that. But one day, a huge rush of water washed the hatchery away, Ms. Sisk-Franco said. The site is now somewhere beneath Shasta Lake.